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‘Dane-Skins’: Excoriation in Early England

M. J. SWANTON

ALTHOUGH judicial excoriation seems to have been known since earliest times on the Continent of Europe—where it may be related to the much-debated Merovingian practice of scalping¹—it makes only a relatively belated appearance in England. From the tenth century onwards we find scalping mentioned, together with other mutilations, as an allowable punishment to inflict on runaway slaves found guilty of theft, or on recidivist or ‘really untrustworthy men’.² And it is mentioned among other atrocities committed by the followers of Earl Godwine in 1036.³ After the Conquest, however, as the concept of treason became increasingly relevant with the development of the feudal state, such punishment is invoked for the crime of lese-majesty. In the collection of English customary law that goes under the title *Leges Henrici Primi* it is ordained that for a man found guilty of slaying his lord there should be no kind of redemption:

but he shall be condemned to scalping, or flaying *excoriatione* (or disembowelling *evisceratione*), or to human punishment which in the end is so harsh that while ending the dreadful agonies of his torture and the miseries of his vile manner of death, he may appear to have yielded up his wretched life before he has won an end to his sufferings. LXXV. 1.

The manuscript readings are variable in respect of this point. From the time of the pioneer seventeenth-century Saxonist William Somner until the opening years of this century, scholars read *excoriatione*, although now the definitive edition by Felix Liebermann prefers *evisceratione*.⁴ Equally, there was no doubt always some confusion in the minds of enthusiastic executioners; it is but a small step from flaying the head to flaying the entire body. And partial excoriation might be considered a natural consequence of evisceration. Otherwise, however, excoriation is naturally regarded as a crime, and sufficiently commonplace to be mentioned as such in the laws.⁵

According to Bracton, *laesas majestas*—very broadly conceived at this date to embrace the concept of betrayal of trust or breaking faith in any sense—was to be visited by the ‘last punishment of bodily pain’.⁶ By the thirteenth century this was normally interpreted as hanging, drawing and quartering. But in contemporary English literature we can catch an occasional glimpse of even more terrible retribution.⁷ One extended account occurs in the probably thirteenth-century English romance *Havelock the Dane*. There one traitor, Godric, is simply beheaded. But another, Earl Godard, who ironic-

ally had earlier offered to assume all responsibility for plotting to kill the heir to the throne, is condemned to be flayed alive. It is apparently the fact that Godard was 'the kinges ounne frend' which makes his betrayal of trust so heinous, and allows the author to describe his punishment with such gusto.⁸ The fact that this detail does not occur in alternate versions of the Havelock story suggests that this may have been a late addition in its development. Geoffrey of Monmouth relates how in remote antiquity Moranian invaders of Northumbria had been flayed alive wholesale by order of the savage king Morvid.⁹ As in the thirteenth-century romance *King Horn*, flaying alive was sometimes regarded as a barbaric practice attributable to non-Christian Saracens.¹⁰ And it is interesting that, although apparently commonplace in the east, the fourteenth-century Arab diplomat Ibn Battūta can scarcely mention the business without a shudder.¹¹

On the Continent there is ample evidence that the practice of excoriation for *laesas majestas* was no mere fictional horror at this time. In 1199, for example, Bertram de Gurdun, who according to Roger de Hoveden had mortally wounded King Richard I at the siege of Châlus, was flayed alive, despite the pardon of the dying king, by order of his routier ally Mercadier.¹² Of course this took place in the heat of war. Typical of legal procedure is the case of Philip and Walter de Launoy who in 1314 were condemned to be flayed alive by degrees when convicted of adultery with two daughters-in-law of King Philip IV of France.¹³ But in England well-documented cases of judicial excoriation are rare. In 1176 the younger Henry's vice-chancellor, Adam, was condemned to be hung and flayed alive on a trumped-up charge of treason; but he in fact subsequently escaped this fate, claiming benefit of clergy.¹⁴ After the battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297, however, this was the fate actually suffered by Hugh de Cressingham, *homo pomposus et elatus*, Edward I's treasurer and notorious chief justice itinerant in the north. The victorious Scots are said to have taken the 'fat and fair' body of their enemy and to have cut his skin into small pieces—not as souvenirs, but in contempt, for they declared he was 'not so much a treasurer as a traitor to the king'.¹⁵ The author of *The Chronicle of Lanercost* adds that William Wallace ordered one broad strip of skin to be taken from head to heel so as to make him a sword-belt.¹⁶

No doubt in certain circumstances the complete skin of a criminal might be publicly exhibited as a deterrent to others. The Worcestershire antiquary Peter Prattinton records having seen a probably sixteenth-century *ex libris* in a Scots chieftain's copy of David Lindsey's *Dialogue between Experience and a Courtier*, which threatened that anyone stealing the book would be 'hanged on a hook at the chirche door'.¹⁷

It may be worth mentioning in passing that such a fate for one's skin need not necessarily have been always involuntary. The fourteenth-century Hussite hero Jan Troknov (alias Ziska) is said to have given instructions that on his death (which took place in 1424) his skin should be used for a drum to lead his Reformation forces into battle, and so terrify his erstwhile foes.¹⁸ Some historians suppose this report to be a case of heroic exaggeration, if not mere fiction. But of course the relationship of literature and reality

is not a simple one. Swift's *Modest Proposal* for the reduction of Irish famine includes the suggestion that after the children had been fattened and killed for the English meat market, the skins, 'artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen'.¹⁹ Clearly Swift's intention is that the reader should be sickened by this extravagant ramification of his 'modest proposal'; and yet the use of human skin for just such purposes is well documented in Swift's England. The barbaric flaying alive of a peasant lad as a kind of rural lynch-law in Leicestershire about 1700 was regarded at the time as remarkable.²⁰ But in ordinary judicial contexts, however, the remains of an executed felon traditionally lay at the disposal of the executioner. Commonly they were made over to medical dissection—which may cast some incidental light on the ancient hostility which existed between surgeons and executioners who might be supposed to have gained relatively sophisticated anatomical knowledge as a result of their professional practices. But the remains seem customarily to have been flayed: the author of *Havelock* speaks of flaying Godard 'like the thief whom men do hang, or the dog they sling into a ditch'.²¹ The magical uses for flayed human skin are well attested.²² But the skin will have had all sorts of practical uses. Certainly the sword-belt made for Wallace was not unique. This unhappy practice seems to have survived as late as the early part of the nineteenth century in England when, as innumerable correspondents to *Notes and Queries* affirm,²³ the skins of notorious malefactors were commonly tanned and sold to the public, either in small pieces as simple souvenirs, or in larger pieces suitable for making belts, gloves, shoes or, particularly popular, for use in book-binding.²⁴ And of course horrifying instances may be cited from more recent European history, too well known to require documentation.

Corroborative material evidence as to the existence of this practice in medieval England comes to hand in examining the fabric of certain extant medieval church doors. The lining of wooden doors with leather was a common medieval practice. And it has long been believed by antiquarians that in some cases at least, the remains of skin found beneath the hinges, locks and strap-work of church doors was in fact human in origin. And, presumably because it was invariably church doors that were in evidence, that this was the result of a punishment specially meted out for sacrilege. In particular they would be the remains of sacrilegious Vikings—although such evidence as exists suggests that sacrilege met with only the slightest penalty in later Anglo-Saxon England; and if we are to believe the pessimistic Archbishop Wulfstan, such penalties as there may have been were either ignored or unenforceable.²⁵ When Samuel Pepys visited Rochester in Kent in 1661 the great west doors of the cathedral were said to be covered with the skins of Danes.²⁶ And in the same and subsequent centuries similar traditions were recorded at Worcester, Westminster, Hadstock and Copford in Essex and elsewhere.²⁷ In point of fact, so specific an attribution as Viking skins is likely to be false *a priori* since these doors all belonged to a later date. The possibility that they may have been cut down or re-inserted from previous Saxon buildings is feasible only in the case of Rochester and of Hadstock.

And in the case of Rochester it seems unlikely, inasmuch as we know the Saxon church to have been in a considerable state of dilapidation by the time of the Norman rebuilding.²⁸ In any case, the entire notion might seem inherently unlikely, because even an average church door is large, and several skins would be needed to cover each one. As Dr R. Reed points out, after tanning and trimming one could scarcely hope for a piece of finished leather more than three feet square from even a large man²⁹—that is, supposing the leg-pieces were not used, as lovingly described by the author of *Havelock* and illustrated in the early fourteenth-century Queen Mary's Psalter.³⁰ Not all nineteenth-century antiquarians were so credulous. Speaking of the Hadstock tradition, the notable local antiquary R. C. Neville is elegantly dismissive, maintaining an amused, and amusing, scepticism.³¹

It was with some excitement, therefore, that the development of popular microscopy in the early part of the last century made possible the scientific examination of these remains for the first time. In 1847 fragments of skin found beneath the strap-work of the north door of Worcester Cathedral were submitted by the antiquarian Albert Way to the pioneer histologist John Quekett, conservator at the Royal College of Surgeons. On the basis of the appearance of two surviving hairs, Quekett declared himself perfectly satisfied that it was indeed human skin, and 'taken from some part of the body of a light-haired person, where little hair grows'.³² The Viking-hunters were satisfied, despite an obvious chronological discrepancy. The north door of the Cathedral (of which now only a very small part remains) almost certainly belongs to some time in the fourteenth century, and was probably coeval with the construction of the north porch itself, built in 1386. Shortly afterwards Quekett was able to examine other fragments of skin from the probably eleventh-century north door of the parish church Hadstock, badly decayed and removed in 1846. Again on the basis of three surviving hairs he reported the identification of human skin, 'in all probability from the back of the Dane, and that he was a fair-haired person'.³³ And he went on to pronounce the same for material taken from the south door of the parish church at nearby Copford, except that in this case the hairs were more numerous, larger and darker than before.³⁴ Significantly, he seems also to have claimed as human fragments of white leather taken from beneath the hinges on the remaining middle leaf of the triple door leading from the south transept into what is now St Faith's chapel (the old 'revestry') in Westminster Abbey.³⁵ Romantic antiquaries could even assert an identity for the felon who supplied the skin for the Westminster door—was it not clearly that of the bankrupt merchant Richard de Podelicote, ringleader of the gang who in 1303 burgled the Pyx chapel, approached through the revestry and at that time used as the Royal treasury.³⁶ The door fits conveniently into the appropriate date in this instance, belonging probably to some time in the thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Quekett's brother, William, recalled the histologist's having been sent, unsolicited, pieces of skin from the door of the church at East (i.e. Little) Thurrock in Essex, which were also identified as human,³⁷ and he may subsequently have identified many more such.³⁸ Certainly the notion was soon firmly established in the popular

imagination, and this century Dane-skin 'traditions' have been reported from as far afield as Stillingfleet in the East Riding and Llanaber, Merionethshire.³⁹

Now in point of fact, the identification of human skin is particularly difficult, since the grain-pattern varies considerably depending upon a wide variety of factors. Furthermore, skin used for early door-coverings, where not treated with paint or some sealing substance, will have received so much wear and consequent polishing that its surface is invariably worn very smooth. Only in very favourable cases, where the pristine surface has been preserved beneath a hinge, lock or strap-work of some kind, can the identification of human skin be suggested with anything like certainty. It was clearly desirable therefore that such evidence as still exists should be re-assessed in the light of a further century of scientific development. Critical histology has developed considerably since Quekett's pioneering work. In particular, with respect to skin identifications, modern diagnosis would place emphasis less on the character of individual hairs than on the grouping of follicles—the hair of human skin being placed at random and at considerably lower density than that of other animals.⁴⁰

Unfortunately the material evidence has still further deteriorated since Quekett's time. Those doors from which the evidence was taken are now mere fragments or have gone missing altogether; or a more squeamish age has felt it necessary to remove the evidence of former barbaric customs. Quekett's identifications had been accepted without question by Sir Arthur Keith when cataloguing the collection of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1923.⁴¹ But the actual collection was destroyed by enemy action during the last war. The pieces of skin from Worcester formerly in the Prattinton collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London are now missing,⁴² and the authorities at Worcester are unwilling to allow the fragment preserved in the chapter library there to be examined. The material from Pembridge and Little Thurrock seems also to be no longer extant. Nevertheless, sufficient material survives for us to be able to review at least part of the evidence under modern scientific conditions.

In 1959 Dr M. L. Ryder of the Animal Breeding Research Organisation at Roslin had occasion to examine a fragment of skin (then in the private collection of Mr D. M. D. Thacker), which had reputedly come from the Westminster Pyx door. The follicles lacked pigment entirely—unusual in human hair—and were arranged more densely than could be expected for even the scalp of a human being; so Ryder concluded that it was in all probability calf skin.⁴³ Then in 1970 Dr R. Reed of Leeds University Department of Food and Leather Science examined a second fragment, this time certainly from the old revestry door at Westminster, and again dismissed the notion that it might be human in origin, identifying it as dark, vegetable-tanned cow-hide.⁴⁴ Unless a variety of skins had been used for the Westminster door, this clearly cast some doubt on Quekett's original identification. However, further fragments of the Copford and Hadstock skins, which are preserved respectively in the possession of the Essex and Colchester Museum and the Saffron Walden Museum Society, have now (1973–4) been

subject to further examination by Dr Reed. And in these two cases he is satisfied that they are in fact likely to be human in origin.

The Copford skin was relatively thick, indicating a reasonably mature as distinct from a young person; and traces of pigment confirmed that he had in fact been dark-haired as Quekett supposed. It had not been tanned so as to form leather, but was 'natural' parchment made by stretching the wet, 'unhaired' skin during its drying.⁴⁵ It had been placed 'hair-side' to the door and the flesh-side treated with a gesso-like substance prior to being painted red. This coincides interestingly with the early medieval craftsman Theophilus' account of wooden doors being covered with untanned hide (though he specifies horse, ass or cow), attached to the door while still damp and then coated with gesso before being painted red.⁴⁶

The Hadstock sample similarly had the flattened layer structure characteristic of parchment, and exhibited a grain structure appropriate to human skin. The remaining hairs were mostly white in colour, although a few light yellow ones were present, indicating a man with fair or greying fair hair. The flesh-side, retaining some traces of original flesh, had been placed facing the wood. The outer face was apparently sealed with a mastic material—probably a plant-based resin—containing bright red granules. Again, one is reminded of Theophilus' recommendation that after painting, the door-skin should be varnished with linseed oil and sandarac.⁴⁷

The whole question must therefore be re-opened. It certainly cannot be dismissed, as one might have wished, as a persistent folk-myth. There is now clearly sufficient modern scientific evidence to support the general tradition of excoriation in medieval England, however much mention of this may appear to have been ignored, or even shunned, in the records. It is to be hoped that during the continuing restorations of our medieval churches, all early doors, and especially the areas beneath the ironwork of all early doors, will receive careful attention.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. See generally: H. Brunner, *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte*, ed. C. F. von Schwerin, Berlin, 1958, II, pp. 786 ff; F. S. Lear, *Treason in Roman and Germanic Law*, Austin, Texas, 1965, pp. 159–61 and references there cited. And see also: J. Hoyoux, 'Reges criniti: chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens', *Rev. belge de philol. et d'hist.*, XXVI (1948), 479–508; E. Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung, Germ. Abt.*, LXXII (1955), 177–85.

2. See generally F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, Leipzig, 1903, I, pp. 191, 334.

3. *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer and J. Earle, Oxford, 1892, I, p. 158.

4. *Op. cit.* in n. 2, p. 591; and cf. *Über das englische Rechtsbuch Leges Henrici*, Halle, 1901, p. 8. Followed more recently by L. J. Downer, ed., *Leges Henrici Primi*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 232–3.

5. *Op. cit.* in n. 2, p. 609.

6. *Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, ed. T. Twiss, Rolls Series LXX, London, 1878–1883, II, pp. 260–1. For the most accessible recent account see J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1970, cap. 3 *passim*.

7. E.g. *Layamon: Brut*, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, EETS CCL, London, 1963, I, pp. 168–9; *Seinte Marherete*, ed. O. Cockayne, EETS XIII, London, 1866, p. 38; *King Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, EETS CCVII, London, 1952, I, p. 51; *Merlin*, ed. H. B.

- Wheatley, EETS XXXVI, London, 1869, III, p. 431; *The Romance of Guy Earl of Warwick*, ed. J. Zupitza, EETS, ES XLII, London, 1883, I, p. 136.
8. D. B. Sands, ed., *Middle English Verse Romances*, London, 1966, pp. 74, 115–17.
9. *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. A. Schulz, Halle, 1854, p. 41.
10. *Op. cit.* in n. 8, p. 19. And cf. *Sir Ferumbras*, ed. S. J. Herrtage, EETS, ES XXXIV, London, 1889, p. 44.
11. H. A. R. Gibb, ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battūta*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd S. CXLI, Cambridge, 1971, p. 713.
12. *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Hovedene*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Series LI, London, 1868–1871, IV, pp. 83–4. Some other authorities name the victim as Peter Basil.
13. Godefroy de Paris, *Chronique Métrique*, ed. Jean A. Buchon, Paris, 1827, p. 228; and cf. the closely contemporary *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, ed. A. de Montaignon, Paris, 1854, p. 250.
14. *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Series XLIX, London, 1867, p. 122.
15. *Henry Knighton's Chronicle*, ed. J. R. Lumby, Rolls Series XCII, London, 1889–1895, I, pp. 371, 382.
16. *Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. J. Stevenson, Edinburgh, 1839, p. 190.
17. Society of Antiquaries of London, Prattinton MSS vol. VII, p. 627.
18. Aeneas Sylvius, *Historia Bohemica*, Frankfurt, 1687, p. 98.
19. Jonathan Swift, *Prose Works*, ed. H. Davis, XII, Oxford, 1955, p. 112.
20. J. Throsby, *The Supplementary volume to the Leicestershire Views: containing a Series of Excursions ...*, London, 1790, p. 239.
21. *Op. cit.* in n. 8, p. 115.
22. Cf. J. Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 167–9, 180.
23. *Notes and Queries*, 2nd S. II (1856), 157, 250–2, 299, 419; 3rd S. VIII (1865), 463, 524; IX (1866), 309, 422; X (1866), 277, 341; 4th S. XI (1873), 138, 292, 373, etc.
24. Examples may be seen in the library of Bristol Royal Infirmary, Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds, Exeter City Library and other places.
25. See especially D. Bethurum, ed. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, Oxford, 1957, pp. 256, 262, 268; K. Jost, ed. *Die 'Institutes of Polity, Civil and Ecclesiastical'*, Bern, 1959, § 19.
26. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. Latham and W. Matthews, London, 1970, II, p. 70.
27. *Loc. cit.* in n. 17; J. Dart, *Westmonasterium: History and Antiquities of the Abbey Church of St Peters, Westminster*, London, 1723, I, p. 64; W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*, London, 1724, p. 75; R. Newcourt, *Repertorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale Londinense*, London, 1708, p. 191.
28. Cf. *Textus Roffensis*, ed. T. Hearne, Oxford, 1720, p. 142; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, Rolls Series LII, London, 1870, pp. 136–7. The doors at Rochester are no longer extant, long since replaced. It must be assumed that by ‘great’ Pepys refers to the main western entrance.
29. *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers*, London, 1972, pp. 285–7.
30. *Queen Mary's Psalter*, ed. G. Warner, London, 1912, pl. 265.
31. ‘The marvellous-loving crowd will regard this sacred edifice with particular veneration, as attached to the entrance (“attached” being taken in its literal sense) was, for many centuries, an object qualified to gratify their taste, and really well worthy of comment. An outer covering, yellow and tough, handed down to a somewhat incredulous age, by forefathers certainly much more confiding in such matters, as the actual skin of a Dane. Luckless individual, perhaps a stray one, captured and flayed alive by his mortal foes the Saxons, his hide being nailed to the church door, as a kind of warning scarecrow to those of his countrymen who might not wish to part with their upper garment. Of course so pretty a tale finds ready credence, and not for worlds would we bring it into disrepute, merely insinuating that on the fragment of the ancient portal, removed last year to make way for one at least weather tight, there is certainly *something* tawny in hue and coarse in substance; but whether the parentage so *flattering* to human vanity derives thence confirmation, we will not determine.’ (*Antiqua Explorata*, Saffron Walden, 1847, pp. 34–5.)
32. John Quekett, ‘On the value of the microscope in the determination of minute structures of a doubtful nature’, *Trans. of the Microscopical Society of London*, II (1849), 152–3.
33. *Ibid.*, 155.
34. *Ibid.*, 155–6.

35. G. G. Scott, 'Gleanings from Westminster Abbey', *Gentleman's Magazine*, CCVIII (1860), 578–80.
36. The most accessible account of the robbery is that retailed by H. Harrod, 'On the crypt of Westminster Abbey', *Archaeologia*, XLIV (1870), 373–82.
37. William Quekett, *My Sayings and Doings, with Reminiscences of My Life*, London, 1888, p. 117.
38. For example, was Quekett 'the expert' who identified as human fragments of skin from beneath the door knocker of the church at Pembridge in Herefordshire? (*Trans. of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club*, I (1901–2), 142).
39. *The Treasury Magazine*, X (1908), 417; Cledwyn Hughes, *A Wanderer in North Wales*, London, 1949, p. 69.
40. For a good general introduction to modern methods see D. Brothwell and E. Higgs, eds., *Science in Archaeology*, 2nd edn, London, 1969, pp. 539 ff.
41. Catalogue of the Hunterian Collection of The Royal College of Surgeons, London, 1923.
42. *Catalogue of Antiquities and Miscellaneous Curiosities in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, London, 1847, p. 46.
43. Personal communication from Dr Ryder.
44. Personal communication from Dr Reed.
45. For an engaging contemporary account of the preparation of parchment see *The Exeter Book*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. v. K. Dobbie, London, 1936, p. 193.
46. Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, ed. C. R. Dodwell, London, 1961, pp. 17–19.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
48. There is a useful check-list of doors with decorative ironwork of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries in Jane Geddes, 'Early Medieval Ornamental Ironwork', MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute, 1974, pp. 59–61.